

## **The wisdom of being ready (without necessarily giving up)**

After a short introduction I will summarize my criticism on Els van Wijngaarden's *Ready to give up on life* and also add a few remarks on Frits de Lange's essay and on the notions of 'completed life' and 'narrative foreclosure'. I conclude with some thoughts on 'being ready'.

### **Introductory**

In January 2016 an Advisory Committee on Completed Life ('committee Schnabel', after its chairman), installed by the Dutch government, published its rather voluminous report. The committee's conclusion and advice is that *if* this 'completed life' exists at all, it is in all likelihood only in a tiny group of people, hardly justifying new special legislation.

The committee held hearings to which were invited organizations and individuals covering every view on the subject, the present writer included. The committee also took due notice of the research of Van Wijngaarden (as published up to that date).

Quite out of the blue, the government, in a letter to parliament, nevertheless announced plans for a new law on 'completed life', shortly afterwards followed by a similar proposal from a member of parliament.

### **Critical remarks**

Van Wijngaarden (and her co-authors) on the basis of their research concluded their interviewees, who considered their lives to be completed, to possess the following five characteristics: "1) a sense of aching loneliness; 2) the pain of not mattering; 3) the inability to express oneself; 4) multidimensional tiredness; 5) a sense of aversion to feared dependence" (in two papers published in 2015, now chapters 3 and 4 in *Ready to give up on life*, 2016; see p. 78).

What drew my attention is that *all* these characteristics are *negative*. As I am a practicing philosopher, counselling individuals who, as far as our human condition allows this, aim at obtaining maximum autonomy over the end of their lives, I counsel regularly precisely the kind of individuals Van Wijngaarden interviewed. (I would not be surprised if I spoke with some of her interviewees.)

I have no reason to deny the characteristics Van Wijngaarden came up with to be present (in a certain number and in a certain intensity) in *all* individuals who feel themselves nearing the moment of maybe ending their life (without necessarily in fact doing so).

However, what I *do* deny is that these individuals and their circumstances possess *only* these *negative* characteristics. A week after my hearing at the 'committee Schnabel' I visited a client. During this consultation my client (90 years old; I'll call him 'Peter'; one of his children was present) talked about his life being 'completed' and he kind of looked forward to being able to end it at a not too distant moment. To be sure, he

didn't reach his high age without a number of the old-age problems that tend to go with it.

Before leaving I told Peter about the 'committee Schnabel' and I asked him: could he in a few words indicate what this meant to him, his life being 'completed'? He came up (very cursory) with five (!) characteristics which I jotted down thus (numbers added): 1) done everything; 2) seen everything; 3) no need to do or see more; 4) have had great times; 5) been very happy.

Needless to say, this comes nowhere near scientific research. But it did interest me, as this client ended his life some three months later. (His son informed me about the course of events.)

You don't end your life for no reason. This means there is certainly ground for interpreting Peter's first three characteristics in the sphere of Van Wijngaarden's results. His last two characteristics, however, were no less important and simply expressed his gratitude for the life he had been able to lead.<sup>1</sup>

Why only negative?

What would or could explain the research coming up with *only* these negative characteristics?

My first criticism I stumbled upon in the Prologue (p. 8-10). Van Wijngaarden tells about her meeting an artist<sup>2</sup> whose work and way of working made a deep impression: "Her work is about 'knowing immediately'." Van Wijngaarden felt impressed by "the striking resemblance between Dineke's way of doing art and myself doing phenomenological research." And this brings her to say: "Just like evocative phenomenological descriptions, visual art can give unique aesthetic expression to factors that are basic to perception and embody these factors in distinctive ways. It can be seen as a mode of experiencing the world itself. *To put it in the words of Merleau-Ponty: 'Painting does not imitate the world, but is a world of its own'.*" Italics are added; precisely the fact that the phenomenological research results in *a world of its own* is what I consider to be problematic.

This returns in several places and I best illustrate it further by (part of) the motto given to Part 2 of the book (p. 75): "Being-In the world of the other is a way of going wide open, entering in as if for the first time, hearing just what is, leaving out my own thoughts, feelings, theories, biases." Is this 'as if' and 'leaving out' really feasible? Doesn't it result in 'a blind eye'? In a "world of its own"?

Here my second criticism comes into play. The interviewees ("most" of them) hoped they were by being interviewed contributing to a "further relaxation of the euthanasia-law". And these participants later clearly felt (p. 231-234) a "sense of misrepresentation". Why? Because "they were in

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1 Famous neurologist Oliver Sacks (1933-2015) wrote a very fine booklet, just before dying of cancer. It is entitled *Gratitude* (New York/London 2015). I am not sure if Sacks knew about the 'completed life' debate, but the motto he gave his booklet almost makes you think he did: "I am now face to face with dying, but I am not finished with living."

2 Dineke Groenhof Blaauw. She supplied the beautiful illustrations preceding every chapter of Van Wijngaarden's thesis.

favour of a more liberal euthanasia policy" while the research results turned out to be used against such a more liberal policy.

Frankly, I think these participants are right. The researchers do take this serious, but their answer is inadequate. They say participants have this feeling, despite the fact "that we have always been very open and clear about our neutral position...". But this "neutral position" is next described by the researchers as "not being proponents of a further relaxation of the law". This, surely, is far from neutral in a debate between those who favor and those who oppose a further relaxation of this law.

Again, I have my doubts about the method used, when the researchers say: "In qualitative research, it is fairly common that there turns out to be a gap between what participants think about themselves and how they present themselves in telling their experiences" (p. 231); this is not just 'fairly common in qualitative research', it goes for everybody in virtually every situation.

And when in the final chapter it is said about the characterization presented of the interviewees: "Rather, we have provided a characterization from an insider perspective *in line with the way people view themselves*" the interviewees clearly do not agree with the italicized part. (p. 247)

As I indicated, the fact that the phenomenological research results in a *world of its own* is what I consider to be problematic. And as the position the researchers took in this debate can hardly be described as 'neutral', it is no surprise to find the interviewees in the end described with *only negative* characteristics.

The non-Dutch reader

Am I too severe? I hope not. The subject literally touches on life and death and misunderstandings find their way into the world but too easily. I am afraid Van Wijngaarden (unwillingly, no doubt) contributes to them. Her thesis is written in English and may thus reach a fairly large non-Dutch public; it is a pity therefore that she refers to a "legal right to euthanasia", saying: "Under current Dutch legislation, however, most of the concerned older people do not have a legal right to euthanasia, as they do not meet the criteria specified in the Dutch Termination of Life on Request and Assisted Suicide Act..."(p. 127; again p. 195 somewhat different). Unfortunately, this is misleading. In the Netherlands *no-one* has a *legal right* to euthanasia, *not even* those who *do* "meet the criteria specified in the Dutch Termination of Life on Request and Assisted Suicide Act". I trust that this is obvious to a Dutch reader (at least I hope so), but I am worried about the non-Dutch reader.

### **Completed life?**

So what about this 'completed life'? In his essay "When is a life completed?" Frits de Lange says this expression "describes the *reason* why someone judges the wish and the decision to end one's own life as legitimate." I think

this is correct and it is illustrated by Peter (see above) and his five characteristics.

If Peter would have come up with *only negative* characteristics, it would have been better, though, to say he was 'tired of life', 'finished with life' or maybe 'suffering from life'.

De Lange refers at this point to a "moral evaluation" and again, I agree. 'Completed life' is a notion that is normatively laden. It is nothing medical but at best a philosophical or existential notion, and a fairly unclear one at that. It is certainly debatable if it is suited to be the central notion in a law that is supposed to allow 'specialists' (yet to be trained) to give assistance with the suicide of their client.

Peter however, it must be noted, took his own responsibility and ended his own life. And yes, he considered his decision to be legitimate and at my request he gave me his reasons why. His case was a case of self-euthanasia, in contrast to physician-euthanasia.<sup>3</sup>

### **Narrative foreclosure?**

Now – Van Wijngaarden often refers to this – are we to consider a choice like Peter's an example of "the premature conviction that one's life story has effectively ended"<sup>4</sup>? In other words, is this a case of so-called "narrative foreclosure"?

Well, I am tempted to say 'narrative foreclosure' is possibly a more suitable way to describe the *phenomenon*, while 'completed life' may be the way for the individual to describe his *reasons*. Why not. However, two important provisos must be made here.

*First proviso.* Peter did 'foreclose' the story of his life. But – and this is vital – who is to decide that this would be 'premature'...? Mark Freeman? Frits de Lange? Els van Wijngaarden? Or Peter...?

Let's not forget: humans are mortals. We *know* the story of our life, or our life as story-telling, is *not* infinite. We are well-advised to be aware of this and to realize that our telling the story of our life is definitely *finite*. Our ability to add to the story of our life is equally *finite*. We do *not* live forever and our narrative is *not* infinite.

*Second proviso.* The problem – a familiar one, by now – is of course the fact that currently *only negative* characteristics of this 'narrative foreclosure' are given. I don't see why. It is as if Peter would be under some kind of

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<sup>3</sup> There is no room here to further clarify this distinction, but see my "Self-Euthanasia, the Dutch Experience: In Search for the Meaning of a Good Death or *Euthanasia*", *Bioethics* 2016; 30 (9); 681-688. (Available on my website [www.ninewells.nl](http://www.ninewells.nl) under 'recente publicaties'.) In Peter's case physician-euthanasia would only have been possible when and if his physician considered his collective old-age problems as an 'accumulation of geriatric complaints', *together* resulting in what the 'euthanasia-law' describes as 'unbearable suffering'. This was not the case.

<sup>4</sup> Freeman, M. (2000). When the story's over: narrative foreclosure and the possibility of self-renewal. In M. Andrews, S. Slater, C. Squire, & A. Treacher (Eds.), *Lines of narrative: Psychosocial perspectives* (pp. 245–250). Toronto: Captus University Publications, p. 83.

obligation to keep on developing 'future selves', to keep on 'rewriting his past', to keep on planning 'new chapters' to add to his life-story. Well, it is part of *his* story that he didn't.

### **Being ready**

Peter was ready to give up on life. But maybe this is less of a novelty than we tend think nowadays. "After all, dying well means escaping from the danger of living badly", says Seneca (4BC – AD65)<sup>5</sup>.

We have a *phenomenon*, 'foreclosing' the 'narrative' of one's life, and we have one's *reasons* for doing this. These reasons may be divers: 'completed life', dementia, cancer, other afflictions. Different individuals will make different choices in comparatively equal circumstances. Some – a minority, Peter being one of them – will choose to 'foreclose' their 'narrative' themselves. Some will ask their physician. Most will let the 'narrative' close itself in due time.

What constitutes 'dying well' or a 'good death' will differ among individuals. Nature often gives us a hand too. As Schopenhauer (1788-1860) says: "That all a man's faculties tend to waste away as he grows older, and at an increasing rate at that, is surely very sad: but this is also something necessary, even beneficial, as otherwise death, for which it is a preparation, would be too hard to bear."<sup>6</sup>

When his physician told him he would let one of his friends know he was doing well and getting better, philosopher David Hume (1711-1776), who was like Oliver Sacks dying of cancer, replied "as I believe you would not choose to tell any thing but the truth, you had better tell him I am dying as fast as my enemies, if I have any, could wish, and as easily and cheerfully as my best friends could desire."<sup>7</sup>

Hume, that is, was ready to give up on life, even though near the end of his short autobiography he contemplates "that were I to name the period of my life, which I should most choose to pass over again, I might be tempted to point to this later period."<sup>8</sup>

*Ton Vink, Velp, May 2017.*

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5 In his *Letters to Lucilius* 70: Bene autem mori est effugere male vivendi periculum. This is especially relevant to a *self-chosen* good death. See note 3.

6 In his *Parerga und Paralipomena I Zweiter Teilband. Aphorismen zur Lebensweisheit*. Zürich: Diogenes, 1977, p. 537.

7 John Greig, *The Letters of David Hume, Volumes I & II*, Garland Publishers, New York/Londen, 1983, Vol. II, p. 450.

8 David Hume, "My Own Life", in: John Greig, *op. cit.* Vol. I, pp. 1-7, p. 7. Hume wrote these pages a few months before dying.